14/09/1968, a Programme by Henri Langlois

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ABSTRACT

Henri Langlois's programmes are well-known for tracing secret relationships between the films that were screened throughout a day, tracing conceptual and aesthetic links for an ideal spectator that could watch all of them. This essay analyses Langlois's film programme for 14 September 1968, which included *Blind Husbands* (Eric von Stroheim, 1919), *The Big Sky* (Howard Hawks, 1952), *Bonjour Tristesse* (Otto Preminger, 1958) and *Bande à part* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964). The author looks for approximations and relationships of different nature, as if the four films – belonging to different historical periods and modes of production – were part of a montage that enabled us to perceive, or discover, new aspects of each of the films. The article proposes relations of two and three amongst the films, in search of links that could bring together the four films. It also suggests that it is precisely triangular relationships – the difficulty or impossibility to include three in a couple – that emerges as the common ground of all four films. Programming becomes thus an interpretative game.

KEYWORDS

Henri Langlois, Cinémathèque Française, *L'affaire Langlois*, Eric von Stroheim, Howard Hawks, Otto Preminger, Jean-Luc Godard, programming strategies, *Histoire(s) du cinema.*

I have understood, Capitan!
I have understood!

1 Imagine you are twenty years old that year.

1968, not one more or one less.

Imagine you arrive to Paris that September. September, with its end-of-holiday flavour, the time of going back to school or to work. A September just like any other, yes, but exacerbated, because that year hasn't been like any other and it is not only the return after the summer holidays, but also the return from May'68, from the exceptional. In June the right had won the elections and this September is more September than any other.

2 Imagine that it is any afternoon, the afternoon of Saturday 14, for example, and that around two thirty you leave your small bedroom and walk across Paris to attend the first session of the Cinémathèque at the Palace de Chaillot.

Imagine that that is what you have been doing every afternoon for two weeks, since you arrived to Paris. To go to the Cinémathèque, and attend the screenings organised by Henri Langlois. This is why you've come to Paris. This is what distinguishes it from other cities: a screen that is not like any other. Because the one who decides what to screen is unlike any other.

3 Even so you were almost too late. Because in February the Ministry of Culture, led by André Malraux, had been about to replace Langlois.
The film-makers of the Nouvelle Vague, and later the old masters and the new contemporary film-makers, from France and across the world, had stood up together, had organised demonstrations, had banned the screening of their films at the Cinémathèque unless Langlois was readmitted.

Langlois had come back. Cinephilia had triumphed. And it had inadvertantly rehearsed what would come later on, in May.

4 You walk across Paris and you know what you are going to watch. Four films.

(Four, they are four, the four evangelists, goes a song that you don't know at the time. One musn't exaggerate, they could also be three, then it would be a trinity, with the primary colours. Each number is, when studied carefully, the most important one.)

At three *Blind Husbands* (Eric von Stroheim, 1919).

At half past six *The Big Sky* (Howard Hawks, 1952).

At half past eight *Bonjour Tristesse* (Otto Preminger, 1958).

(At half past eight? Probably later. Someone didn't notice the duration of *The Big Sky*. Hawks makes long films, even if he doesn't seem to.)

At half past ten *Bande à part* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1964).

From 1919 to 1964, 45 years of cinema, of one cinema only, beyond categories, periods, movements and countries.

5 You already know one of the films. *Bonjour Tristesse*. Or perhaps not. Because you have seen it but can hardly remember it. You didn't know how to watch it. An adaptation of a best-seller. A film for the wealthy. But you know that today you'll watch it otherwise.

You know that Langlois's programmes don't leave anything open to chance.

Or perhaps they leave everything open to chance, but to a chance that doesn't exist. It is like playing cards. From chance, the inevitable is born. If one wants to believe in it. You don't know it already, but Langlois believes in fortune tellers and often asks them for advice

His programmes are born from an intuition, of unexpected kinships between films that seemed distant one from the others. Between them passages are weived, symetries, familiarities, at times evident, at others remote.

This is why you know that you won't watch *Bonjour Tristesse* in the same way, that it will be as if you had never watched it before. Because of the magic of programming. You trust Langlois. He believes in fortune tellers. You believe in his intuition.

6 Langlois – whom you have seen a couple of time between screenings, but to whom you have never dares to get close – reminds you of someone. You are nit sure of whom. You search in your memory, in the people that you have met throughout your life, but you can't find the likeness. It is only normal that you don't remember, because he doesn't remind you of someone real, but rather of a character from a novel, of a novel that you read years ago, in your early teenage years.
Langlois reminds you, even if you don't know it, of the image that years ago you had created for yourself of Long John Silver. The imposing presence. The charisma. The untidy aspect, as if he was a Parisian pirate. But also the secret, the secret of the treasure.

You could think that, you could think that the four films of his programmes are like pieces of paper taht are meaningless on their own but which together, overlaid one top of the other, might give the coordinates of the treasure. What treasure? Perhaps to the old question: 'what is cinema?'

Imagine you are young and that such question worries you, that you take it seriously, convinced that there is a secret, the secret of a sect as it were, and that the day you understand it, then the world and the films will look otherwise, bathed in a new clarity.

7 What could possibly link these films together then?

During the screening you have felt that familiarity, and still you find it difficult to pin it down now. You calculate, add up and subtract, but you can't quite figure out how the four films work together. Two by two, at the most. Or three by three, perhaps.

8 *Blind Husbands* and *Bonjour Tristesse* are two holiday films. It makes sense. After all, it is September. The time to remember the summer that just went away.

Each film in its own terms is a story about holidays, as the compositions that one had to write at school. What did you do this summer? Well, we went away – my father and I, or my husband and I – and then a third person appeared, who was also spending the holidays there, and used to spend time with us and, well, the truth is that that person is now dead, yes, the truth is that that person didn't survive the summer, or the holidays for that matter.

As you think that, you oddly envy their tragic holidays. Would yours do for a film? No, no way. You are envious of those who live stories worth telling.

Then you perceive another point in common. They are also films about seduction. About an expert of seduction. Von Stroheim in one of them, David Niven in the other. On the lightness of seduction, but also its gravity. Or about its danger. After all, we have already said, one of the characters is dead in each film. The one who doesn't belong to the initial pair.

The lightness of seduction and of the summer; its tragic conclusion.

You also think about the parallel between two German and bold film-makers, with a Hollywood carrier, and how by coincidence they were both Billy Wilder's actors embodying German officials. You think about that but perhaps it is better to leave it here.

9 *The Big Sky* and *Bande à Part*: there are two men. Two men doing as they please. Two men that spend their days playing to hit and shoot each other, playing truant, going to the edge of the river or the canal. All of this at the margin of civilisation, a margin that is for some the great North West and which has been reduced for others to the periphery of the big city.

There are two men and the possibility to win a lot of money. But they need a woman for this. A young Indian girl, the daughter of a chief who is the key to negotiating in the territory of the Blackfeet. Or a young woman who can let them into a house where there are a lot of dollar notes from a doubtful source.

They need the young woman but, at the same time, once she appears things can't remain the same. They do tricks and push each other to be able to seat next to her at the bar. There is always one too many. And she, well, she seems to prefer one of them. Or maybe the other?

And all of this is told by a friendly voice over, which nevertheless never gets too close to them. Or with the lightness of the episodes that follow, and which diverge from the main story and return to it, perhaps because the story is so simple that both film-makers have the freedom to explore the margins themselves, to smuggle life in the film.

10 *Blind Husbands* and *Bonjour Tristesse*.

The Big Sky and *Bande à part*.

Is it a coincidence? The first with the third and the secind with the fourth, As if it were a quatrain with an alternate rhyme.

A-B-A-B.

Perhaps that is one of the secrets of the programme, hidden verses and rhymes in what looks like a text in prose.

Another day the verses will be:

A: *The Avenging Conscience* (1914), by Griffith

B: *Destiny* (*Der müde Tod*, 1921) by Lang

A: *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1945), by Lewin

B: *Spellbound* (1945) de Hitchcock

The Avenging Conscience and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: an adaptation of *The Tell-Tale Heart* the first, of Oscar Wilde's novel the second, both are stories about hidden crimes behind a wall or a closed door, stories where the conscience of crime takes a physical and fantastical form.

Destiny and *Spellbound*: or a woman trying to rescue the man she loves from death (Lang) or from the morbid (Hitchcock).

Another day the films that will rhyme will be *Olympia* (1938) by Riefenstahl and *Passenger* (*Pasazerka*, 1963) by Munk (rhyme, as you can see, can also be based upon oppositions); *What Price Glory* (1952) by Ford and *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (*Chronik der Anna Magdalena Bach*, 1968), by Straub and Huillet. And so many others…

11 A-B-A-B: you wouldn't be able to know back then, but this is how Godard's *Histoire(s) du cinéma* (1988–98) will be organised, a project that was initially going to be realised in collaboration with Langlois.

A-B-A-B, but it is difficult to foresee whether *Histoire(s)* also has an alternate rhyme, or if perhaps all of this is to penetrate in a territory as trustworthy as the predictions of the clairvoyants. Or perhaps it is something that may only be clarified by a clairvoyant.

12 Already in 1937 Langlois had imagined the following programme for a 'Ghost Gala' (MANNONI, 2006: 63-64):

'1: *The Indian Tumbstone* (*Das indische Grabmal*, Joe May, 1921) (2 reels of film). The Raha unearths Goetzke and, having returned him to life, orders him to serve him. Goetzke stands up and disappears...

2: *Goetzke* (2 reels of film). A crossroad in Germany. Goetzke appears, stops his stagecoach and kidnaps Lil Dagover's fiancé. She leaves to look for him and arrives in front of a wall. He obtains the life of his fiancé from Death, in exchange for three human lives.

3: *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari* (*Das Cabinet des Dr. Caligari*, Robert Wiene, 1920) (1 reel of film). Lil Dagover arrives to Caligari's caravan, who introduces him to Cesare. Cesare kidnaps the young woman and then, perspecuted, falls off on the highway. In darkness, a few seconds after the last image, we hear the story of Pigeon-Terreur… then Barrault appears and performs a mime act.

4: The scene with Barrault finishes. For a second, nothing happens. Then we hear a corrosive music and on the screen we can see *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (*Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse*, Fritz Lang, 1933) (2 reels of film), music and a terrible noise, a man is frightened in a room, escapes, but there is an explosion. The man on the phone asks for help... The night...

5: *Kiss of Death* (*Dödskyssen*, Victor Sjöström, 1916). A window seen from the inside of a room, at night time, opens slightly, a tube senaks in and a gas fills the room; then a masked man crosses the room. Two men, hidden in the room and wearing gas masks follow him.

6: An American film: the bottom of the sea, two divers are fighting to death and over that time, instead of hearing the noise of the scene, we either hear the waltz of *Extraordinary Histories* (*Histoires extraordinaires*, Federico Fellini, Louis Malle and Roger Vadim, 1968), or the fight in the cabinet of wax figures of the same film (*Waxworks* [*Das Wachsfigurenkabinett*, Leo Birinsky and Paul Leni, 1924]). Fade to black. Agnès Capri appears on scene and sings. Intermission.

7: *Nosferatu* (*Nosferatu, eine Symphonie des Grauens*, F.W. Murnau, 1922) (1 reel of film): Arrival to Nosferatu's country, the fantastic coachman, the dinner, the blood, the night, Nosferatu enters the room.

8: *The Fall of the House of Usher* (*La chute de la maison Usher*, Jean Epstein, 1928) (2 reels of film). The funeral or the end, I can hear her, she arrives, without the last images.

9: *Vampyr* (Carl Theodor Dreyer, 1932). The characters splits into two. A funeral seen from the point of view of the dead.

10: *The Student from Prague* (*Der Student von Prag*, Stellan Rye and Paul Wegener, 1913). The student

from Prague is in the guest house, and then his double appears, he flees away, the double follows him, the student only finds solace in death, mirror effect.

11: Music and Lilliom climbs to the sky'.

In its own terms: an episode from *Histoire(s)*. Chapter 0a: *Ghost Gala.*

13 But you don't know any of this that 14 September 1968, and it doesn't make much sense to speak about it.

The only thing you know then is that a secret thread ties the four films that you have just seen together. A thread that you can't seem to find.

Blind Husbands and *Bonjour Tristesse*: two films about holidays. But isn't *The Big Sky* a film about holidays too, in its own terms? It is true that the journey os not one of pleasure but, after all, it is a journey that lasts a summer time, until the cold weather announces that the winter is coming soon, that they must return to the South, to the city, to 'civilisation'. What matters then is not the holidays but the summer, which allows one to go far away, climb a mountain, go up the river or, at least, go to the beach.

In *Bonjour Tristesse*, Jean Seberg says, before the weather changes, 'let's breathe in the air'. These were the holidays, a time when one could simply breathe in the air, when that was enough. That was the journey in *The Big Sky*, in an even purest way, a time when it was unnecessary to say it, when one simply lived this way, breathing in the air.

(Langlois had said: 'in fact, a great film is one where we can feel the air between the characters' [ROHMER y MARDONE, 1962: 80]. Perhaps that was the secret of cone,a. The key element that had to enter in the composition: the air.)

And *Bande à part*? Is *Bande à part* a film about holidays? It is not even a film about the summer and the characters go to school, but one could argue that it is a film about improvised holidays, those that one awards oneself. It is a film, we said, in which the characters live as school kids playing truant, and whom in fact seek excuses to miss their English lessons, as if they needed any at their age. It is summertime in the midst of winter, a rather sad, strenuous summer snatched from the cold and the grey, a summer for three in a world they don't care about and where the air they breathe is quickly transformed into their own breath.

14 Holiday films, yes, but all this is a bit of a stretch.

Try again with another clue. *The Big Sky* and *Bande à part*, the story of two men who live free and happy, as if they were kids, but then a woman crosses their way or, better said, they put a woman in their way and then nothing will ever remain the same between them, the harmony is forever broken.

And *Bonjour Tristesse*? They are father and daughter, true, but do they not live like children free to do as they please, without nothing interrupting their complicity until a woman, a woman-woman, crosses their way? Yes, it seems that the three films have to do with freedom and eternal adolescence, with freedom and its end.

Three films where there is dance and songs in the prime of life. *Oh Whisky leave me alone* in *The Big Sky*, the madison in *Bande à part*, the dance of a whole bar expanding across the port in *Bonjour Tristesse.*

But in *Bande à part* they don't dance really together, they can never dance entirely together, the voice over doesn't tell us differently when it speaks out loud what is happening inside their heads: no mater what one does, no matter one what feels, there is an insurmountable loneliness.

And in the second dance of *The Big Sky*, aboard the ship, an arrow from nowhere is stuck in one of the dancers' neck and breaks in an instant of happiness.

Finally in *Bonjour Tristesse* the time of happiness is remembered from a present of disenchantment which is nevertheless a danced present. Jean Seberg and David Niven dance from party to party. But dance is not enough to make one happy. 'If I am happy when I dance, will dance not make me happy?' someone said in *Royal Wedding* (1951), by Stanley Donen. The answer in *Bonjour Tristesse* is clear: no, the phrase is not reversible.

15 And *Blind Husbands*? It doesn't seem to match with the other three. What is the time of innocence lost here? The film starts with the disenchantment, with a married couple where love no longer flows as it used to, and it concludes with the recovery of that love. A couple that is reconcilied through the death of a third person.

The death of a third that also brings together a father and a daughter in *Bonjour Tristesse*, and which decides the final couple in that musical chairs game that is *Bande à part*.

But whereas in *Blind Husbands* the death of the other allos the recovery of happiness, in *Bonjour Tristesse* it only brings the melancholy of a shared guilt. It is no longer common freedom, but sadness, it is not a new idyll that starts, but rather they live with the awareness that that will no longer be possible. Life without turning back.

And in *Bande à part*? It is difficult to know how the death of the third will affect the recently formed couple. There doesn't seem to be an idyll there, but they don't seem to be under the weight of guilt for being the survivors, the bitterness of being the couple by default.

(Death in *Bande à part*: Arthur dies as he plays, just the way he falls pretending to have been shot when he has actually been shot for real. And in *Bonjour Tristesse* it all begins with the child-like complot, until the game and its lightness become a tragedy).

In *The Big Sky*, in any case, none of them dies and the characters have become adults, without bitterness. The time of a shared childhood is over, yes, but it is seen as somethings positive, to leave behind certain pleasures, but also certain obsessions. To grow up is pleasurable. To grow up is simply possible.

16 The four films don't seem to match. Except, perhaps, now that you think about it, in the fact that they don't match. That might be what they have in common, in that they don't add up.

As the say doesn't say: there are not two with three.

It is in that impossibility of the number three where the four films meet each other.

They are different answers to the same question: what do we do with the number three? From this point they all go their different ways, paths that sometimes cross with the other three, and others radically diverge from them.

You then ask yourself another question: would then *Bande à part* be Godard's *Jules et Jim* (François Truffaut, 1962), with its black and white, its two men, its wife and voice over? Yes, it is his *Jules et Jim* precisely because departing from the same number, they finish by not being alike, it is because they don't have much in common in the end.

17 Could you then remember, or could you imagine that you remember, the other reason that brought you to Paris? It wasn't only cinema. Or cinema as a refuge, as a flight forward. A flight from the reminiscence of another 'there are no two with three', the reminiscence of other musical chairs that left you along the way. Without deaths, that is true, without tragedy,

only a certain sadness, and like the voice over read by Anna Karina in *Bande à part* says: 'What to do then to kill the time that drags on?' To go away. To visit the Louvre, or rather run across the Louvre. Or perhaps not, to visit it slowly perhaps, to get lost in the paintings, to get lost in the films at the Cinémathèque.

18 You could imagine Langlois, poor and wasteful, in his office, organising the programme as one that does the pools. 1X2. Looking for the infallible programme, where all variants fit. At the end, the big prize, cinema as a completely visible mystery.

But this pool won't resolve anything because in cinema, in programming, there is no end. The only thing that matters is to end with the possibility of going back to the beginning, cinema doesn't stop, there are always new possible combinations.

You could also imagine him attending a screening at the Cinémathèque, amongst real and imaginary enemies, the order of the screen silencing the disorder of his own life, casting a spell upon it.

You could imagine him leaving the screening calmed down. His image then becomes confused with your own, also calmer, ready to live in a time that doesn't drag on, a time that deserves to be lived, both walking in silence in the streets of Paris, at night.

Tomorrow afternoon you will come back.

Sunday 15 September 1968: *Golem* (*Der Golem, wie er in die Welt kam*, Carl Boese and Paul Wegener, 1920), *Une vie* (Alexandre Astruc, 1958), *Wild Strawberries* (*Smultronstället*, Ingmar Bergman, 1957), *Marie pour mémoire* (Philippe Garrel, 1967).

1X2. Back to the beginning. ●

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